

The INQUIRER

90p

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the voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7791 31 March 2012



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Beyond the story of Easter

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

The Inquirer is published fortnightly
by The Inquirer Publishing Company
(2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

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Advertise for £6 per column cm, on
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col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page
supplement is £200. One column on
a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page,
£75. A5 fliers may be inserted for
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Inquiring Words

It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.

— ee cummings (Unitarian, poet, playwright, critic)

Editor's view

It's time to open up the EC

When the Executive Committee of the General Assembly was created to replace the GA Council, one important aspect of democratic governance was overlooked. There were no provisions made for the process to be open and accessible to members of the Unitarian movement. The Executive Committee decided to function as though it were an Engagement Group, meeting privately and disallowing any EC member to reveal what was said at the meetings. Members of the EC said it was an important way to create trust amongst the group.

In the intervening years, despite many requests that the EC open up its meetings and its process, that policy of secrecy has remained. Meeting minutes, skeletal accounts, are posted on the national web site. And, a set of 'Key Messages' is placed in an advertisement in *The Inquirer*. But that is simply not enough, not democratic enough.

Consider this motion, proposed by the North & East Lancashire Unitarian Mission to be voted on at this week's General Assembly meetings in Keele:

'This General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches requests the Executive Committee urgently to prioritise and formalise a policy which will enhance the Executive Committee's communication both to and from the District Associations and the congregations.'

The Inquirer believes there is a simple way to improve communication. That is to open up the EC meetings. Let in those who are paying for and governed by the Executive Committee. Let in reporters from the denominational press. Open up the process. Every governing body on earth would prefer to operate behind closed doors. It's easier, it can be more efficient. But it is not democracy.

Although the Unitarian movement in Britain is a very different organisation, it is worth considering how the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association conducts its open meetings. This excerpt is taken from the UUA Governance Manual, available online at <http://bit.ly/GIRPAR>:

To be consistent with our commitment to the right of conscience and the democratic process and achieve a transparent and open process, the Board will:

A. Provide advance notice of dates and locations of regular business meetings, and making agendas, reports, and the previous meeting minutes available prior to the meeting;

B. Provide avenues for comment on issues on the meetings' agendas;

C. Accommodate observers at regular business meetings, and notify all participants of recording and archiving policies.

D. Make documents submitted for consideration to the Board of trustees publicly available, with the exception of documents distributed during executive sessions.

E. Conduct its business in public, except when the Board decides by majority vote to deal with the following kinds of matters in Executive Session:

- volunteer and staff personnel matters that are of a delicate nature
- legal matters of which public discussion could be legally injurious
- budget matters that involve such legal or personnel matters
- property acquisition or disposition
- business of the above nature involving a member society if the society requests an Executive Session.

—MC Burns

With thanks

The colour cover of this edition of *The Inquirer* was sponsored by the Youth Department.

Don't look for history at Easter

Bill Darlison says instead of looking to Calvary for historical accuracy, our task is to find resurrection *before* death.

The Society of St Dismas is one of those very worthy Catholic organisations which attempt to fill the gaps in state provision for the underprivileged, dedicated to the welfare of those neglected members of the community. Specifically, St Dismas helps ex-prisoners, people who are trying to get their life together after spending time in jail. It takes its name from the so-called 'good thief', one of the two men who were supposedly crucified with Jesus; Dismas was the one who, according to Luke's Gospel, repented just before his death, and asked for Jesus' blessing.

The story goes like this:

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him, 'Aren't you the Christ? Save yourself and us!'

But the other criminal rebuked him. 'Don't you fear God,' he said, 'since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.'

Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

Jesus answered him, 'I tell you the truth. Today you will be with me in paradise.' (Luke 23: 39-43)

The man is not named in the Gospel text; he was given the name 'Dismas' (from a Greek word meaning 'sunset' or 'death') probably during the 12th century, and the name has stuck. He has his own feast day, 25th March, which is considered to be the actual date of the crucifixion. In addition to a name, Dismas has been given a biography of sorts. Legend has it that when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were fleeing into Egypt to escape King Herod, they were set upon by a band of brigands, one of whom recognised that there was something special about the members of this family and ordered his fellow bandits to leave them alone. This was Dismas, apparently. And, with a coincidence worthy of a Thomas Hardy novel, the next time he met Jesus was when he was crucified beside him.

Craving a back story

It says something about the function of stories in human life that we feel the need to flesh out shadowy characters of history or scripture; that a mixture of imagination and piety can turn a few stray facts into sagas of flesh and blood

people, complete with parents, colleagues, careers, relationships, and personalities. We've done the same thing with characters who appear at Jesus' birth. The story of the wise men is told very simply in the Gospel of Matthew. We aren't told their names; we aren't even told that there are three of them. 'Three' is derived from the number of gifts that they bring. But in the Middle Ages these anonymous men became Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar and you can find a casket containing their remains in Cologne cathedral. There's even a story of the Fourth Wise Man, a pious tale about Artaban, who gets delayed on the way to Bethlehem, but eventually catches up with Jesus at his crucifixion.

Dismas in Limbo still?

All of which is very charming, but when it comes to scripture it is not without its problems, and these are acute as far as Dismas is concerned. Insistence that this man is a genuine character from history has generated some intriguing theological puzzles. Think about it for a moment. Jesus is promising that this man will be with him in paradise, and yet Catholic theology teaches that only the baptised can get to heaven? It's plainly stated elsewhere in the scriptures: 'Unless a man is born again of water and the holy spirit, he will not enter the kingdom of heaven.' But how could Dismas receive baptism? There have been many attempts to solve this particular conundrum.

I was taught at Catholic school that there were other kinds of baptism – 'baptism of desire', and 'baptism of blood' for example. Those who desperately wished for baptism, but who died before they could receive it, would be considered baptised, as would those who were martyred. So, Dismas could presumably come under one or other of these categories. Then there are those who say that Dismas didn't in fact go to heaven at all, but to Limbo, the place of the un-baptised righteous. But since Limbo was abolished by the pope a couple of years ago, one might legitimately ask where he is now. And if he only got as far as Limbo he can't be a real saint, so praying to him could be considered pointless.

Death by comma

A more sophisticated theological problem concerns the word 'today' in Jesus' words, 'I tell you today you will be with me in Paradise.' If it means that Dismas will be in heaven with Jesus that very day (i.e. the first Good Friday) then what is the point of the resurrection? Or the ascension? Incidentally, while this is a big enough problem for traditional Christians, it is an almost insuperable one for Jehovah's Witnesses, who believe the soul doesn't survive bodily death. What could Jesus have meant, they ask. Their ingenious

(Continued on next page)



'Dismas' Crucified Thief by Lovis Corinth (1883)

The person on that cross is you

(Continued from previous page)

solution is that he wasn't telling Dismas he would be in paradise with him today, he was giving him the information today that he would be in paradise eventually, that he would be resurrected one day in the future. It all depends on where you put the comma. Such things are no laughing matter. People have died over such arguments.

Arcane vs practical

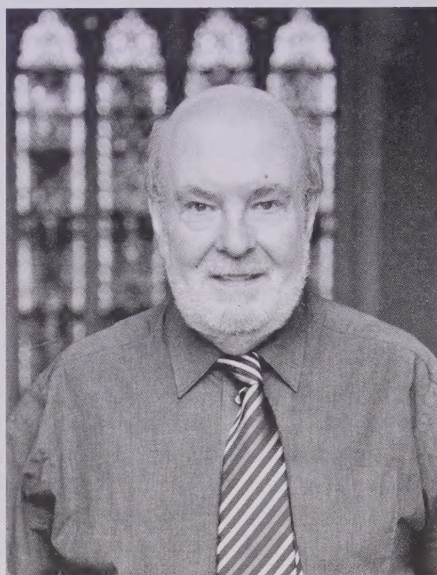
But when we were taught these things, such arcane theological questions didn't bother us. We raised more practical issues with the teacher. It didn't seem fair, we said. Here's a man who has spent his life doing wicked things and just because at the last minute he says 'sorry' he gets into heaven. And then we asked, 'Does that mean we can do the same?' It conjured up some intriguing possibilities. You could live a life of complete debauchery, but as long as you are in a position to say 'sorry' at the end, you'll be okay. We were even taught that if we attended mass on the first Friday of nine successive months, we would be guaranteed the grace of final repentance.

This guarantee was given in a vision to St Margaret Mary, a 17th century nun, and still forms part of popular Catholic piety. The Roman Emperor Constantine, who lived centuries before St Margaret Mary, was a great believer in final repentance. Although he became a Christian in mid life, he refused to be baptised until he was on his death bed, so that all his sins could be washed away in one go and he would get into heaven without any problems. And his sins were pretty horrific; the history books tell us that his later years were stained with bloodshed, and he had his eldest son and his wife executed. Apparently, he kept a priest in attendance at all times just so that he wouldn't be taken by surprise.

Teachers struggled with hypotheticals

While we schoolboys were somewhat cheered by the thought of final repentance, we couldn't help but feel some sympathy for the unfortunate person in the opposite situation, the one who lives a pretty good life but who commits one mortal sin and dies before he has had the opportunity to repent. 'How can that be right?' we asked. Consideration of such hypothetical situations has kept Catholic teachers on their toes for generations, and they have exercised the casuistic skills of the finest theologians.

So, charming as it might be to flesh out the rudimentary stories of scripture with imaginative details, it can lead to complications. But the most significant result of such activity is that it obscures the real power behind the text. It is my opinion that the stories in the gospels are not historical narratives. Their principal function is not to tell us about the life of a man called Jesus of Nazareth. They are stories about us, about what it means to be a human being, and this episode with the two thieves, which looks like an afterthought, an almost pointless detail, is extraordinarily important. That the Gospel writers thought it important is proved by the fact that it is one of the few stories which appears in all four Gospels.



Bill Darlison

The person on the cross is you. It is I. It is everyman, and everywoman. Crucifixion is not just an archaic and barbaric punishment for a few unfortunate law-breakers; it is a condition of life. Crucifixion is the perfect metaphor for the human situation, because, unlike most types of execution, it delivers a slow, lingering, painful death.

Poised in pain

What's more, it takes place for all of us on Golgotha, Calvary, 'the place of the skull' – an image of life stripped down to its skeletal essentials. We are all poised in pain on the cross of life. None escape. All attempts to insulate ourselves from life's pains are fruitless. Even the rich and famous, even the super-talented and super-beautiful, even the spiritually advanced,

suffer the pains of loss, of vulnerability, of mortality.

And, just like Jesus, each of us is crucified between two thieves – one on the right and one on the left. The Gospel text may not tell us their names, but it is clear about their position; and it specifies that they are thieves – not just any old criminals. What do these thieves steal? They steal our life. They are the past and the future, the twin thieves of everyone's life. The past is on the left, the future on the right. The past consumes us with regret, remorse, revenge, nostalgia, habit; the future eats away at our life with anxiety, uncertainty, procrastination, fear.

'Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans,' said John Lennon, not originally, but memorably enough. Life is what happens while you are regretting the past and afraid of the future. When, then, is the transformed life? Jesus told the repentant thief: *today*. 'I tell you, today, you will be with me in Paradise.' We enter into the life of promise today. Now. It's now or never.

By destroying, or transforming, those twin thieves of our lives we enter into a whole new way of being, resurrected life, when the tomb which held us fast is broken open, and we discover a new relationship with life, and a new understanding of its pains. This is the consistent message of the world's spiritual traditions. This is the perennial philosophy. This is what Easter means.

Easter is not 'Once upon a time ...

The message of Easter is not that once upon a time a single individual's death paid the price of sin and he was rewarded by having his corpse reanimated. It is, rather, that everyman and everywoman can and must wake up from the un-lived life and save the world from the corrosive effects of sleep. The story of the literal crucifixion and literal resurrection from physical death of a single human being is biologically impossible, historically implausible, and, in the way that it is often presented, it is morally questionable.

But the story of our own resurrection from spiritual death *while we are still alive* is the most important and liberating message we will ever hear.

The Rev Bill Darlison is a retired Unitarian minister in Yorkshire.

Cross Street first for civil partnerships

Licence for religious ceremonies

Cross Street Unitarian Chapel, Manchester was awarded a licence from Manchester City Council to hold civil partnerships on its premises.

Staff members at the General Register Office believe that Cross Street Unitarian Chapel is the first religious premises in England and Wales to be licensed for civil partnerships. This will enable gay and lesbian couples to hold a religious ceremony and the civil ceremony on religious premises.

The Rev Jane Barraclough, minister of Cross Street Unitarian Chapel, says:

"We are delighted to be able to offer this service to the LGBT community, which we consider a basic human right. We note with sadness the history of homophobia in many faith traditions as well as the current hateful language from some faith leaders that has received so much coverage in the media.

But this is a time of great celebration for us, not sadness.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Manchester Registers' Office who have gone out of their way to help us with the application process. The City of Manchester also has a long and fine tradition of celebrating human diversity in all its glorious manifestations."

Councillor Sue Murphy, Deputy Leader of Manchester City Council, with special responsibility for equal opportunities, said: "When the legislation changed, the Council acted quickly to make it possible for religious buildings to apply for a licence. As a city which embraces the equality agenda it is no surprise that Manchester is one of the first cities to licence a religious building to hold civil partnerships registrations. We were pleased to support the Unitarian Church through this process."

Unitarians offer a spiritual community based on common values of mutual respect and spiritual exploration, rather than fixed beliefs and traditions. They have a long history of inclusivity over issues of marriage, as well as many others. They were amongst the earliest to train women clergy. In 1977 it was formally resolved that Unitarian ministry be open to all, regardless of sex, race, colour or sexual orientation, since when there continues to be a number of openly LGBT ministers serving the denomination.

Fight for equal marriage goes on

While Cross Street Chapel's licence is progress, the fight continues for full and equal marriage in the UK. Unitarian General Assembly Chief Officer Derek McAuley along with Quaker and Liberal Jewish leaders has met with staff at the Home Office and lobbied for full gay marriage rights.

The government released a consultation earlier this month which outlines full civil

marriage for gay and lesbian couples, but does not extend that right to religious premises. It states the government intends, 'to make no changes to religious marriages. This will continue to only be legally possible between a man and a woman.'

Comments on the consultation document are open until 15 June.

An online form is available here: <http://bit.ly/zr9diq> or here <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-civil-marriage/>

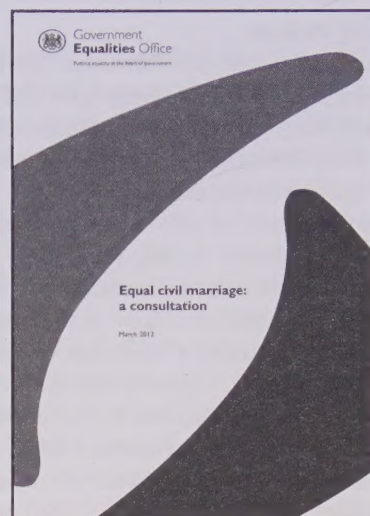
Paper responses to the consultation may be addressed here:

Government Equalities Office, 3rd Floor Fry, 2 Marsham Street, London, SW1P 4DF

At the Unitarian General Assembly meetings this week, delegates will consider backing a resolution proposed by the Scottish Unitarian Association which reads:

Mindful that other religious traditions may not wish to carry out same-sex marriages, this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches calls upon HM Government at Westminster, and The Scottish Government at Holyrood, to ensure that legislation is passed so that all couples, same-sex or mixed sex, have equal access to civil marriages, religious marriages and civil partnerships.

— MC Burns



In Scotland, push continues for equality

Jill Cunningham of Edinburgh; Joan Cook, also of Edinburgh, representing the Scottish Unitarian Association and the General Assembly Executive Committee; Linda Haggerstone of Glasgow (although Linda was not officially representing the Glasgow congregation) at the parliamentary reception for the Equal Marriage campaign, held at the Scottish Parliament on 31 January.

The Edinburgh Gay Men's Chorus sang and an Equal Marriage wedding cake was served. Representatives had the chance to raise awareness of the Equal Marriage campaign, and to talk directly with MSPs/constituents about the case for change.



FUSE weekend challenged, inspired

2013 weekend in the works

By Andy Pakula

On the weekend of 3-5 February, 128 Unitarians descended on the Chatsworth hotel in Worthing for FUSE, a Festival of Unitarians in the South East. They travelled as little as one mile and as much as 260 miles. Most were from congregations in the London District, but more than 10% came from farther afield.

As an organiser of this first-time event, I will not purport to offer an impartial review. To me, FUSE was a strong and hopeful sign of the development of new enthusiasm, new energy and new possibility in British Unitarianism. Many of the people who attended FUSE had never before attended a Unitarian event beyond their congregation. And yet they came – attracted by the possibilities for spiritual development, for inspiration, and for the opportunity to learn about developing more vibrancy and spiritual depth in their own congregations.

Impartial or not, I can objectively report that there was a great deal of laughter and there were tears shed too. There was tremendously enthusiastic appreciation expressed and I was asked hopefully “will there be a FUSE 2013?” more times than I can remember.

FUSE had a major impact on people who left with strong impressions, exciting ideas, and probably more than a little anxiety about how they might begin to do some of the things they had excitedly scribbled down over the weekend.

FUSE had an excited, hopeful, and faithful atmosphere different from any other Unitarian event I have attended. There was a strong sense that we can indeed be relevant and important for more of today’s British population, that our glory days may still be to come, and that we may – individually and as congregations – be willing to endure the discomfort of the change that such a transformation would require.

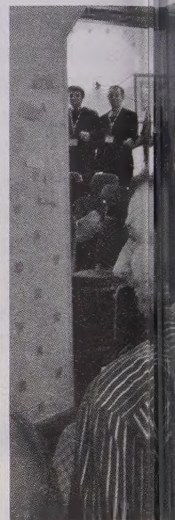
This atmosphere was clearly not for everyone. One person spoke out for the value of traditional over contemporary worship, against the development of ‘mission statements’ to help a congregation focus on a clear shared purpose, and against an ‘agenda’ focused on growing our movement. To some, these characteristics smack of evangelical Christianity (albeit without the associated theology).

I don’t agree with that view. I am an evangelical humanistic Unitarian – as confusing as that combination of terms may be. I want everyone to have the opportunity to find the life-changing faith Unitarianism made available to me and I will do all I can to bring that opportunity to others.

A central conviction of the organisers was that not one person should be turned away from FUSE because of lack of money. Despite the modest budget available for FUSE, bursaries were provided to everyone who needed them. This way of organising – where those who had more gave more to enable the participation of those who had less – is also central to the Unitarianism which FUSE represents. Nearly £1,000 more was collected at FUSE 2012 to support bursaries for FUSE 2013. No one should be turned away!

FUSE was a gathering for those who are preparing for change – not just to save our movement from disappearing, but to bring the transformative message of our movement to the vast numbers of people who need communities of faith that are welcoming, open, tolerant, and loving. There *will* be a FUSE 2013. No doubt it will attract more people. No doubt it will continue to promote an enthusiastic outward-facing kind of Unitarianism. That kind of Unitarianism is certainly not everyone’s cup of tea, but I am delighted to see that so many people are ready to join the movement toward a brighter Unitarian future.

The Rev Andy Pakula is minister with New Unity Unitarians, London.



Workshops covered growth, mission

By Sarah Tinker

“If you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe,” was astronomer Carl Sagan’s marvellous opening line to one of his groundbreaking Cosmos shows of the 1970s, delivered in his characteristically slow and enigmatic fashion. So far as delivering lines is concerned, keynote speaker Robin Ince, at the FUSE weekend, was several light years away from Sagan, whom he quoted loudly from time to time.

Ince romped through seemingly many hours of material in a barely taking 90 minutes of comedy and social commentary, with science and rational thought holding it all together. Famous for his anti-Carols and Lessons for Godless People and The Infinite Monks’ Cage Radio 4 programmes he presented with Prof Brian Cox, Ince described his family background as ‘300 years of Yorkshire vicars’. He regards stand up comedy as just another route towards the same goal – of shouting at groups of people in a room. He may have shouted a bit but he certainly made us laugh as he revealed ever more tantalising snippets from his remarkably lively mind and steered a well-worn path through his material.

It’s nice to be in the company of an allegedly ‘militant atheist’ who does not feel attacked for having religious beliefs! And I hope that Robin Ince realised after spending an evening in our company that it’s completely possible to have a faith *and* be sensible *and* have a sense of humour. He and Carl Sagan both share a loving wonder for our planet and the vast universe in which we nestle – I think we Unitarians share this

and introduced 'blinged' fish



al practices and future plans

A group of us had arrived early on Friday in Worthing for a very full preaching workshop led by the Rev Dr Patrick O'Neill who has taught such classes for many years in the US. It was good to be reminded of the importance of preaching in our religious tradition, which Patrick defined as the 'disciplined articulation of our religious community's truth and good news'. My Saturday began with an hour's Kundalini yoga, followed by a workshop on the future of spiritual communities.

With other varied sessions on offer such as 'what kind of leader are you?' and the intriguingly titled 'muscle for the soul', an introduction to Ignatian spirituality and a session on how to welcome newcomers the FUSE organisers had done an excellent job in planning such an appealing programme in three strands that covered worship, spiritual and congregational health.

In the workshop on contemporary spirituality we considered the many different forms that spiritual communities take, one being the work-type community that meets occasionally at a special event such as a festival. This is just what was achieved at the FUSE weekend – bringing 128 Unitarians together, mainly from the London and south east district but also from further afield – and inspiring us once again with our liberal faith's truth and good news.

Congratulations are due to all the organisers for the professional planning that made FUSE such a success.

The Rev Sarah Tinker is minister with Essex Unitarians in Kensington.

Pushed us out of 'cosy'

By Caroline Blair

Here's a sentence most of us will have heard many times: "The definition of insanity is repeating the same action and hoping for a different result". The FUSE weekend in Worthing put a variation of this into my head: "The definition of insanity is repeating the same action and hoping for the SAME result." I am talking about actions relating to people here, not apples falling from a tree. There was a substantial piece of grit in the FUSE oyster, and it was meant to take us somewhat out of our comfort zone. A church can never reach a point where the members can say, "We've got everything perfect now, so let's just sit back and enjoy it." It is fatally easy for a church to become a cosy routine for its long-term members; it is only a short step from that to the quick-sands of 'in-group', 'clique' and 'the regular members will never stand for that.' And that is the path to stagnation, to a declining, ageing congregation, perhaps even to a failing church. We were constantly led over small hurdles. My weekend started with a different way to meditate: instead of batting people gently away when they intruded on my thoughts, why not focus on them, stay with them, find out if they need something from me? It was an interesting and potentially valuable technique, but inevitably there were occasional moments of, "Oh no, not *her*." No one pretended that it was a spiritual practice that consisted entirely on congratulating yourself on the loveliness of your close friends.

Later I only really strayed into the 'creating mission statements' workshop by accident, taking a rather dim view of mission statements; but the workshop was unexpectedly sharp and focused. We learned just how tempting, and how pointless, it is to try and throw every positive label and aspiration into a mission statement; forced to boil it down to a couple of memorable lines leads you into a fundamental re-evaluation of the whole point of the church. I am still pondering it.

There were several opportunities to participate in worship, from the charming closing event (complete with a puppet show about some 'blinging' fish) to the Rev Andy Pakula's 'Contemporary Worship', in which he promised to make us feel uncomfortable (strictly with our consent) and did, by asking us to look each other in the eye, one by one: a sacrificial ordeal only slightly less arduous than being ducked in the village pond for heresy.

When I first looked at the timetable for the weekend (which was a work of art), I'm sure that I expected a weekend of relaxing spiritual pampering. And there *was* an element of that. But it was clearly meant to be bracing at times as well, and it succeeded in being so. Asked to write my impressions on a post-it note at the end, I wrote something like, "It has asked lots of questions which I have hardly begun to answer yet."

Caroline Blair is a member of Essex Unitarians in Kensington.

Photos clockwise from upper left: Annabel Kramer and several other teens attended FUSE, participating in the workshops and events. A full FUSE children's programme was offered, and the youngsters helped with a worship service (along with Liz Hills and GA Youth Officer John Harley) on Sunday, which featured 'blinged' fish hand puppets.

The hotel conference room became a sacred space when all gathered for worship. Comedian Robin Ince inspired with his keynote. Top left photo by Andy Pakula. Others by Danielle Wilson.

See story on FUSE contemporary worship on the next page.

Why do any of us go to church?

Why do you bother going to your place of worship every Sunday? What possible good can it be doing you?

I know you meet friends there and that you enjoy being in their company but you could get that in a stamp collectors' club or, even better, an amateur dramatic society – and then you would regularly put on plays to entertain the public.

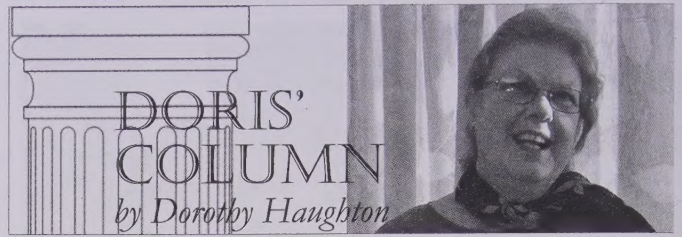
You can't claim that you need to go to church to worship God. Do you seriously believe in a God who hovers in heaven waiting for his weekly dose of praise and petition? Surely, as a practising protestant, you believe that each person is a priest at the sacrament of their own life? No bread and wine for you. No mystic ceremonies conferring inestimable benefits.

You may be the custodian of a really lovely building so is that why you go to church, to keep it open? Do you actually worship there at all, or do you spend all the time worrying about the death watch beetle? 'O Lord, thou who lovest the death watch beetle as much as thou lovest the lamb, grant, O Lord, that the beetle come not nigh us.'

You may feel that you are carrying on a Unitarian tradition of social action and standing up for freedom of worship. If so, how exactly are you doing that?

You may say that you are already heavily involved in various social actions and that you really enjoy the hour every week that you can spend on your own spiritual needs. Which is fine but don't be too surprised when there are only four of you left and you are all over 80. Sadly groups that look entirely inwards tend to die out.

You may be very proud of being a Unitarian. You may be in favour of our services which contain teaching rather more than exegesis. You may boast about the eclecticism of the readings offered. But, when was the last time you discussed a service over coffee, or any other time, with your fellows? Are you sure that the service is not really an hour wasted because you never



mention/think of/refer to anything mentioned therein once it is over?

You were asked, last year, to think of a strapline – a short phrase which would encapsulate the main tenets of your faith. Right, sit down now with a cup of tea or a G&T and think of three reasons why you worship.

Perhaps you could hold another circle service. Give everyone four large sticky notes. On each of the first three, you are to write one of the reasons why you worship. Then read each others' and discuss them. You might end up with a poster for your notice board which reads: 'We worship here. This is why.' Use your fourth note to state what you like best in a service and why, or what you would like more of and why, or what you don't currently get in the services but would like and why. You could end up with a second poster: 'And this is how we do it. And why.'

Or put your thoughts on a postcard and send them to:

The Inquirer, 46a Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich, NR4 6UF Or send an email to: inquirer@btinternet.com

We at Upper Pocklington know why we worship. We are Unitarians just like Florence Nightingale and Joseph Priestley. We continue their proud tradition. If it was good enough for Flo and Jo, it's good enough for us.

Dorothy Haughton is a worship leader in the Midlands.

Her column appears occasionally in 'The Inquirer' with despatches from the 'Upper Pocklington Unitarian Church'.

FUSE offered inspirational worship

By Laurie Kulcher and Adrienne Wilson

Andy Pakula led a thought-provoking workshop on Contemporary Worship, exploring the aspects that make a service traditional and contrasting these with some of the "new" things being tried out in various congregations. Some of the areas looked at included sounds, visuals, props, participation, songs, rituals, use of space (eg seating).

Participants were asked to share information about what sorts of non-traditional things their congregations were doing currently. Almost everyone had at least one example their congregation does or has done or is planning to do. Various suggestions were then shared, along with reasons for employing them, such as attracting new people, livening up services, making services and other gatherings more accessible and more engaging.

It is interesting to note that a number of the "new" things mentioned were actually much older practices such as chanting and meditation.

The session that followed was an actual Contemporary Worship service, again led by Andy. This included a number of the new innovations discussed in the previous workshop. It has to be said that the worship space (the hotel conference room) which the previous evening did not seem appropriate

for uplifting worship, did now become a "space of promise and possibility" as Andy's opening words foretold.

We watched images of the short video "Come as You Are". We chanted together "Gathered here". Individuals who had volunteered or been selected at random read aloud as the spirit moved them: friendship sayings, and longer poems by the likes of Hafiz and Mary Oliver. During a period of meditation and reflection, gentle new-age music played. However, the most inspirational event of the service was a face-to-face, one-on-one participatory activity where everyone was asked to clasp the hand of every other person and speak the words "I see you". Although this was introduced as a potentially uncomfortable exercise, and I believe some people found it to be so, as we moved slowly around the circle making eye contact, I am sure that many found this an agreeable and even profoundly moving experience.

Our closing song (with words on the screen) was Bob Dylan's *Lean on me*, which fitted well with Andy's closing words: "May you be a support when you are strong, may you be supported when you are in need." All in all, a most appropriate Sunday morning service for this inspiring FUSE weekend.

Laurie Kulcher and Adrienne Wilson, members of Godalming Unitarians meeting at Meadow Chapel

All are kings or queens in Transylvania

By Danny Crosby

During my recent visit to Transylvania I was invited to preach at the anniversary service of Altrincham's sister congregation of Maros St George. While preparing I was asked to wear a badge depicting the symbol of the Transylvania Unitarians. Tamas, the minister explained what it means.

There are four distinct features to the symbol: a dove, a serpent, a mountain and a golden crown. The dove symbolises peace, the serpent wisdom, the mountain height, the crown kingship. It is inspired by a passage from Matthew's Gospel chapter 10 v 16 "Behold I am sending you forward as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be therefore wise as serpents and innocent as doves." In this passage Jesus is warning his disciples of the dangers that they will face in carrying their message of radical love, to a wounded world. He is saying that they will be no safer than lambs amongst wolves; he is saying that they must employ wisdom in the way they impart this message, in a hostile world. The Transylvania Unitarians have adopted this symbol because they have needed to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. Throughout their history they have always been a minority group and have faced persecution, from both religious and secular sources because of this.

At the centre of the symbol is a dove, an important image in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It makes its first appearance in the story of Noah's Ark. Noah sends out a dove to find land, eventually it returns with an olive branch. This symbolises the re-birth of life, something very important to Transylvanian Unitarians. They are very much tied to the ground, to the soil and the cycles of life. It is of course the symbol of peace. It also represents the soul and its desire for freedom and openness to all that life offers. We all need the openness of innocence in order to live peaceful, harmless and gentle lives.

The dove stands on top of a mountain, on solid rock. This symbolises the ethical heights that we need to reach in order to fulfil our human potential and appreciate the earth on which we all stand. The rock is also symbolic of stability. To reach our potential we need to stand on solid ground.

The serpent symbolises wisdom. In the bible it first appears in the story of Adam and Eve. It reveals the forbidden knowledge

of life and death. For this the serpent is cursed to sneak around on its belly near to the rocks. The wise serpent lives close to the water, the source of life and for this it is respected by people of desert cultures. They consider the serpent to be very wise indeed. When we think of serpents we think of danger. Some can be venomous and



Danny Crosby

can kill, but their venom can also heal. The serpent is indeed a source of life and death; it does carry the knowledge of life and death and it is of course the gaining of this knowledge that leads to the loss of innocence.

In the Transylvanian symbol the serpent is in a circle, a ring. This symbolises eternity, and the continual rebirth of life. As they say in Transylvania "life is eternal and the soul is invincible, we can be reborn every day" The dove stands within the circle. The wisdom of the circle protects the innocence of the dove. The message is to remain wise and innocent in order to live a full life.

There is a golden crown at the top of the Transylvanian symbol. This is the crown of the only Unitarian king in history John Sigismund, who by signing 'The Edict of Toleration' in Torda in 1568, gave Unitarians protection. This meant that they

were not wiped out as they were in other parts of Europe.

The crown is no ordinary crown, it is golden, it symbolises the God or Goddess, the creator of the universe. It also carries the message of infinite and perfect happiness, a goal worth striving for; it is a source of aspiration for the Transylvanian Unitarians. They believe that we can all be kings and queens, that we can all wear the crowns.

What a powerful image this Transylvanian Unitarian symbol is. It teaches that we can all reach the summit of the mountain and wear the crown of happiness. A difficult journey no doubt, but one worthy of taking. It also teaches that we can attain this if we are wise enough to remain innocent and aspire to that perfect happiness. I learnt a lot in Transylvania.

The Unitarian faith is ever evolving, as all life is evolving. It has its roots in the Liberal Christian Tradition, inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus. Our symbol, the chalice exemplifies this perfectly. It is a kind of cross, but an evolving one, with the flames reaching out much further to a place way beyond our imaginations. So while we are rooted in the Liberal Christian tradition we have evolved beyond this starting point and embrace truth from a myriad of sources.

A flame burning in the cup of love is deeply symbolic of the roots from which we were formed, but the flames seem to indicate something more, something eternal, something way beyond the limits of human vision. I see parallels with both the dove and the serpent and that golden crown of the Transylvanian symbol here. There is freedom in the flames, there is wisdom yet to be unearthed in those flames and there is that crown that we can all aspire to. I also see the rock on which all this stands; the solid base that sustains us as we reach further, to who knows where.

This is religion in its truest sense, this searching together, this working together, and this giving together. Each of us adds to that flame and also takes from it. It is this continual communal search and struggle that is the rock, or the cup on which the Unitarian free religious faith is built. Where this leads, no one can know, certainly not I.

The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.



Symbol of Transylvania Unitarians

Letters to the Editor

**Do fewer things,
do them better**

To the Editor:

I got my Annual Meetings pack a few weeks ago, including the motions that are being voted on this year. This, by my reckoning, gave my congregation five Sundays to think about same-sex marriage, euthanasia, national service and compulsory voting. We will have had a short meeting one Sunday after the service to discuss these, perhaps giving five minutes of our attention to each of these motions. Our delegates will then go to the Annual Meetings, listen to perhaps a 15 minute debate, and then vote.

Is it just me, or does this seem like a tiny amount of time and attention to give to such significant issues? Is it enough time for us as a national movement to really think about them?

What would be better? Here's a thought off the top of my head: Limit the number of motions to one, or two. These would need to be submitted in the summer and would be sent to congregations in September, giving them a good six months to consider issues in discussions and worship.

This would allow grassroots congregations to think deeply about issues and what local congregations can concretely do about them.

Perhaps we need to do fewer things, but do them better.

Stephen Lingwood

Minister, Bank Street Chapel, Bolton

**Allow more time
and votes by proxy**

To the Editor:

Bearing in mind the motion from the Watford Fellowship about making our denominational democracy more representative of the whole General Assembly, rather than just those who attend Annual Meetings, I can't help wondering whether it will be appropriate to have a decisive vote on at least two of the other motions that are due to come up this time. (*Motion reads: That this General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, calls upon its Executive Committee to ask the Constitutional Reform Group to change the constitution to allow proxy voting at the Annual Meetings.*)

Those on assisted suicide and marriage/partnership have profound ethi-

cal implications and are also likely (if anything we do is!) to attract media attention. Local congregations will have to deal with this, regardless of whether they are represented at Keele or not. I am broadly in sympathy with both motions, although I can see problems too, but should we not give the whole movement more time to consider, not only what its stated position on these issues should be, but also whether it wants to have a stated position at all?

Could these motions not be tabled but a vote (including proxy votes) deferred until next year? I appreciate that further delay will frustrate many, but the alternative could be divisive and embarrassing. As far as the wider world is concerned, would it not be enough – at this stage – to let it be known that both issues are under serious, even prayerful, consideration among us?

The Rev Cliff Reed

Minister, Ipswich Unitarian Meeting

**Christians are airbrushed
out of denomination**

To the Editor:

I read with interest Jane Barraclough's article 'Massacre set tone for Ejection' (*Inquirer*, 17 March). However, she makes inaccurate comments when she says 'Christian Unitarian individuals and churches dispute with humanist Unitarian individuals and churches and vice versa. Some disown the logo and even the name 'Unitarian' preferring 'liberal Christian'. As a committed and active Unitarian Christian of nearly 30 years standing, I do not know of any Unitarian Christians behaving in this manner. Moreover, humanist Unitarians, far from disputing with their Christian coreligionists, generally try to have no engagement with them whatsoever, finding them not the bearers of a profound living faith that challenges every age, but the keepers of a dead as dust creed that will put off newcomers. Accordingly, Unitarian Christianity is increasingly airbrushed out of the picture of Unitarianism the denomination puts forward in the London area and throughout the land. Indeed, genuinely liberal and inclusive humanist Unitarians will admit to this in some embarrassment.

Julian Smith

Layperson in Charge (92-)
Brixton Unitarians

Young Olympians descend on Great Hucklow

During the first weekend of March, 25 youngsters aged 7-11, joined the Junior Weekend Team in celebrating all things "Team" related to reflect this year of Olympics.

The children formed teams such as The "Hucklow Harriers" and the "Tideswell Tigers" and enjoyed a wide range of activities which included the sewing of a mascot, the production of their very own "Team Hucklow" t-shirt and then ventured outside and into the village to enjoy the sunshine, whilst undertaking a treasure hunt.

On Saturday evening we were joined by Lee Brennan who ran an evening of team building activities and encouraged everyone to continue to think about the 'strength' they brought to a team. During the chapel service on the Sunday the children encouraged the congregation to consider what their personal strengths might be and these were discussed and added to strips of paper which formed one of the five Olympic rings – which were then joined together in the familiar way and displayed in the chapel.

This coupled with the old favourites of story time, tuck shop and a visit to the trough made for a fun-filled and thoroughly enjoyable weekend.

–Vanessa Rothwell



Junior Weekenders celebrate the Olympics

Photos top-down: Participants made replicas of themselves, emphasising their strengths. They participated in lots of crafts and went on a treasure hunt around the village Great Cocklow. They made mummies and sang songs and participated in the church service at Old Chapel on Sunday morning.
The story left



Southampton Unitarians attract new members

Southampton Unitarians are happy. Our Guest Service in February was an outstanding success and attracted 19 people at least 6 of whom were new. We sat in a circle and the Rev Brian Anderson invited members to speak of their own beliefs and how they came into the movement. Visitors asked questions and Brian handled it all with sensitivity and humour. We don't doubt that we shall gain new members from this service.

Much hard work was done in advance in sending out invitations to those "on the fringe" and a few who have perhaps attended once. This cost little and our expensive advert brought no one. One of our causes of regret that we have several times attracted young people (under 40) and they have done amazing things with immense enthusiasm and then *vanished*. They fail to realise, it seems, how wonderful their attendance at church would be.

Our website had some success but the main thing is that the service itself and all the chat over coffee really impressed visitors who vowed to come again. Watch out Rose Bowl here we come! For more information, contact Brenda Knopf Southampton Unitarians tel 02380555333 email brenda.knopf@btinternet.com

Discovery Holiday bookings now open

Booking forms are available for the Unitarian Discovery Holiday "Ways of Seeing – All in the Eye of the Beholder?" planned for 9 July to 13 July at the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre, Great Hucklow.

There are plenty places left and forms are available at www.unitarianexperienceweek.org.uk. Or, contact the treasurer Marjorie Walker, 236 Clement Rise, Dedridge, Livingston, West Lothian, EH54 6LR. Telephone Number 07718 106732. Please book before the 30th April 2012.

We hope to make more of a holiday where longstanding and new Unitarians and others can meet. Tom McCready will speak on "Western Budd, ha Eastern Christ." John Gilbert will introduce "Art in the Eye of the Beholder" There will also be a speaker from the Sheffield Royal Blind School.

– Margery MacKay



Artist creates prints of Welsh chapels

Recently the South Wales District Association commissioned Rhiannon Roberts from Ciliau Aeron to make a special painting of the existing 13 Unitarian chapels (14, including the Old Llwynrhydowen chapel which is now owned by the Welsh Religious Building Trust).

After graduating with a degree in Psychology from Cardiff University in 2010 she decided to build a career as an artist, working from her studio in Ciliau Aeron, near Aberaeron.

Using her vivid imagination and bright, vibrant colours her paintings are fresh and lively with a modern twist full of character and fun. Her aim in painting is "to make others feel happy". Her website is www.rhiannonart.co.uk/

The prints sell at £49.95 and can be obtained through Megan Jones, secretary of District Association, on 01970 612768.

The painting together with last year's The Unitarian Trail as part of Ceredigion Faith Trails as well as three Interpretation Panels at different locations has proved very useful in promoting Unitarianism in the Ceredigion.

– Cen Llwyd

Newcastle celebrated with cupcakes

Newcastle Unitarians recently celebrated the 72nd anniversary of the opening of our present building with a service led by General Assembly Executive Committee member Joan Cook, followed by tea and cupcakes. The chalice cupcakes were decorated by the daughter of our treasurer.

– Maurice Large